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ABSTRACT

The metaphor of the writing "coach" is used to explore a writing-process approach to the teaching of freshman writing. This approach allows for personal discovery leading to the same sense of accomplishment that the superior athlete enjoys. The mastery of higher levels of skill similarly leads to the potential for higher levels of performance. To serve as an effective "coach," the writing teacher must be constantly involved in the process of writing. The teacher's efforts and problems become part of the course content, shared with the students to help them understand what happens in the process of writing. (AA)

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I WANT MY WRITING STUDENTS TO CALL ME "COACH"

Marshall Kremers

I started using the writing coach metaphor one day after I had stopped to watch our college baseball team practice. The coach was hitting flies to the outfielders and everyone was having a great time, including the coach. As he sent balls winging off his fungo bat it occurred to me that writing teachers might think about the spirit in which they engage their classes. In short, is what we are doing any fun?

After all, my first concern as a writing teacher is with helping my students enjoy the act of writing. If it isn't any fun, what point is there in going on with it? Has anyone ever written a paper worth a reader's time that he didn't enjoy writing? Successful writers thrive on their work; they want to write, even though they may complain that it is hard work. And the discovery of ideas that the writer only finds while writing is what makes the process continue to be exciting. Donald Murray, a writer who teaches writing, has said, "Writing is a process of discovery through language. This is what the student has to understand, what he has to experience himself. The writer uses symbols--words--and manipulates them to find out what he knows and what he feels. He writes to discover what he has to say."[1]

By saying that the act of writing can be enjoyable, that it should be fun, I don't mean to suggest that writing must never be painful. Any effort that requires us to commit the contents of our minds to public view is bound to hurt. But writing can be a good kind of hurt. I made a personal discovery of this truth one day when I was out jogging, preparing for an amateur long-distance race. At the time, I thought long-distance running was something I couldn't do. And I was right--until I found that regular practice leads to higher and higher levels of performance. After I got used to the pain, I began to enjoy daily running; and then soon afterward I was hooked.

What this has to do with writing is clear once we understand that we should be teaching writing as a process. When we ask for products, what happens? Our students try to figure out what sort of product we want. They ask, "What do you want me to say?" And too often we tell them--by giving the topics for assignments rather than writing tasks, and by allowing them to imitate other, more competent writers whose skill they

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can't begin to match. The process approach to writing allows for personal discovery leading to the same sense of accomplishment that the superior athlete enjoys. The mastery of higher levels of skill leads to the potential for higher levels of performance. And yet how can we teach this process unless we know it first-hand ourselves? At my school the cross-country coach is still a runner and the baseball coach can still hit a baseball.

Thus process teaching means showing how by virtue of practicing the skills over and over ourselves. When the writing teacher has turned the skills into a craft of his own, he is ready to guide the apprentice writer. Having said this, I must point out that this does not require one to become a professional writer. I don't mind that George Orwell and Wallace Stevens were better than I am, for after all, my concern is with helping relatively inarticulate and even semi-literate students entering an open-door college develop habits leading to intelligent and disciplined uses of the language. I am a teacher of writing first and then a writer--but I am still a writer. Too many people these days think a writer isn't worthy of the title unless he has published a novel and has an agent working on the film rights. I'm no Frank Shorter yet I still like to go out running. And usually my published writing goes no further than my freshman English classes.

The content for the writing course belongs then to me and to my fellow writers--my students. As writers, we share our predicament: how to find a topic, a direction, a sense of voice. Since I am a more experienced writer, I act as an editor. Often my job is to diagnose a problem and to send students back to their papers to make revisions. I wait patiently for the point at which a sound idea is carried out. And then I encourage the students to do their own editing.

When they first start writing for college work, most freshmen are afraid to commit much of themselves to paper. They tend to hide behind a voice they found somewhere in a classroom along the way. It is the voice they use when they are trying to sell a product to the teacher. Since I want to see writing with someone authentic behind it, I start with my own sense of voice. Instead of writing lectures, I prepare for class by writing my own assignments. I do free-writings along with the class and then read them aloud. I write examples of exposition (I explained the function of a ski binding), of analysis (repressed racism in my WASP up-bringing), and so on. I share these papers with my students because I want them to see that I am not always clear, that I too have to struggle with logic and transitions and mechanics. I want them to know that I have to revise before I can come up with something I'm not ashamed to show around. I also want them to see that I tend to write about ordinary things

that happen to catch my attention, and that they are worth writing about because they matter to me.

Like many writers, I keep a journal. For me a journal is how I keep the ink warm in my T-Ball Jotter. It is what I do to stay in shape. And when I write something worthwhile, I give it out to the class. Recently I made this entry, after going cross-country skiing with my four year-old son:

> Ben calls out from behind that he has to pee. We stop and he unzips his pants. On the white snow his pee is bright orange. We are both a little surprised by how bright it looks--as if someone had spilled Tang at our feet.
>
> And then I remember something I had almost forgotten--Ben has tuberculosis. He has an infiltrate in his left lung and a bright red spot on his arm where the skin test was positive. His pee is orange because he is taking Rifampin, a TB drug. Without this drug, where would Ben be now? Locked away in a sanatorium? I think of the Romantic poets--of poor Keats wasting away in a closed room. One is used to hearing about the disease in the 19th century. But to think of it now, in my son. I have a moment of disbelief, and then a slight sinking feeling.
>
> Down the way there is a path made by a snowmobile. We take it, now gliding smoothly along, Ben right behind me. We stop beside a small creek. There is a deep hole, into which Ben starts lobbing small snowballs. Around the hole I notice bright shoots of grass sticking up in the bare patches where the water has washed the snow away.
>
> When we start back for home, Ben leads the way. He pushes his stubby little skis steadily along. As we are crossing over the meadow, he says, "You know what grows out here in the summer? Banana bread." Hmmm. Yes, time for lunch. But there's no need to hurry.

I am doing a little story telling here, which may begin a discussion of using personal experience as a way of generalizing. This is a story about a father's love and concern for his son. It is also a way of dealing with something I couldn't fully comprehend--my son's disease. So I may want to explain that I wrote this not so much to tell a story as to understand my own emotions. The fact that I wrote this as a journal entry, without outlining beforehand or

worrying over syntax, demonstrates that good writing often occurs when we are just trying to find out how we feel. An audience isn't always required.

I will talk about my journal writing--the habit of making regular entries--as a way of getting into a discussion of the writer's tools. I want my apprentice writers to think about the feel of the pen in their hands, about the first touch of the typewriter keys in the sense that a pianist can describe the feel of cool, polished ivory. I want to know if they prefer a ball-point over a felt-tip, if they type, if they use a manual or an electric; I want them to think about the routine they will need to devote to their writing. If a student cannot see the value in a routine, then he or she is not doing enough writing.

I want my students to know that I must normally go through four or five drafts before I can get something I can begin to edit. They should know that I expect to revise--that all good writers revise. Revision is a routine part of the process. I have found that students are more willing to make a fresh start on a piece when they see that I have to do it as well.

By presenting myself this way as an example, I hope to demonstrate that English teachers have to practice just like anyone else. I cannot teach writing by hiding behind the fiction that I learned to write in college. What I did then is not only best forgotten--it doesn't matter because it is all ancient history. All that matters now is that I show willing students how they can become competent writers through practice. Whatever one's theory of writing may be, that set of principles is best understood when the writer writes--regularly. I think we tend too often to blur the distinction between talking about writing and doing writing tasks.

To say that writing is learned best by doing it is the same as saying running is best learned by doing it. Of course, this doesn't mean that anyone can become a sub-four minute miler simply by running a lot; it takes talent, dedication and intelligent guidance from a trained coach. But the principle is clear. When our hard work is based on discipline, we become more confident and forceful people. And when we write more words than we thought we were capable of, we are ready to make some discoveries. Peter Elbow has written, "Write a lot for enough time just to get tired and get into it--get past stiffness and awkwardness--like in a cross-country race where your technique doesn't get good till you're genuinely tired. The mechanism there is clear; you've got to be tired enough so that unnecessary (and inhibitory) muscles let go and stop clenching."[2]

If my analogy makes sense, if writers are indeed like

cross-country runners, then they are also like mathematicians or mechanics or anyone else who needs to have a sound technique. There is just one basic process. Perhaps more than we realize, the athletics staff is teaching writing and the English staff is teaching athletics. We're all in this thing together. Working together, a faculty can convince students of the need to write well if they will show how writing is just one act within a network of related acts. It is all the same pursuit of excellence, the same concept of process, whether one is fixing a motorcycle, making a double play or writing a paper. On this point Robert M. Pirsig has written, "The making of a painting or the fixing of a motorcycle isn't separate from the rest of your existence. If you're a sloppy thinker the six days of the week you aren't working on your machine, what trap avoidances, what gimmicks, can make you all of a sudden sharp on the seventh? It all goes together."[3]

So, I am a writing coach, even at the risk of being misunderstood by some colleagues who, as a member of my department said to me, think "it is not a good idea to use sports metaphors when talking about writing." If writing is too arcane a matter to be associated with sports, then the writing "crisis" is more serious than I have imagined. Besides, it is the idea that counts here, not the figure of speech. I am merely advocating the notion of excellence in a variety of activities which engage the mind, body and spirit. It seems to me that the ability to write effectively is still the best means we have for shaping and defining this sense of quality in our lives.

Notes

1 See Donald M. Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

2 Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford, 1973), p. 27.

3 Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 319.